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## Causes of Early School Leaving in Secondary Education

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### Abstract

Early school leaving is a considerable problem both for the individual and the family, as well as for the school and the whole society. Students who leave school without qualification have much worse opportunities in the future, regarding career, income, promotion, health conditions, etc. In Hungary, secondary school dropout is a current problem; however, its ratio must be under 10% by 2020 according to an EU strategy. There are several causes leading to school dropout, such as, family background, conflict between family and school, absenteeism from school, bad school achievements, weak school contacts, school failures, etc. The purpose of the research was to find the main causes of early school leaving – according to teachers' opinion. The research was carried out in a Vocational Centre among teachers in the form of self-administered questionnaire in 2017. In the questionnaire, five categories were identified (students' features, family, peers, teachers, and institution) that may contribute to dropout. The result showed that out of the five categories teachers think that mostly students and least the institution is responsible for dropout.

*Keywords:* vocational education; school dropout; contributing factors

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### 1. Introduction

Dropout from secondary school is a severe problem not only for the individual but also for the family, the school system, and the whole society. A well-known and frequently proven fact is that students who do not finish secondary school have fewer opportunities on the labour market, and if they find a job, it typically requires lower qualification, e.g. badly-paid semi-skilled jobs, promising little prospects for promotion or career building. According to American statistics (Christle et. al, 2007), among the unemployed, there are mostly people not having secondary school certificate: while 56% of adult dropped out from secondary school is unemployed, this ratio is only 16% among the ones who have secondary school final examination. There are huge differences in salaries as well: dropouts' average wages are about \$ 12.000, while the ones who have finished secondary school earn \$ 21.000.

On the basis of other US data, school dropouts represent 52% of people who live on social maintenance, 82% of criminals, and 85% of juvenile criminals. Secondary school dropout is thought to be in relation with several other social problems, such as: 1) missing national incomes, 2) missing taxes for state services, 3) increased need for social services and maintenance, 4) increasing crime ratio and deviant behaviour, 5) decreasing political and civil participation in the life of the country, 6) decreasing generation mobility, 7) worse health conditions. All these form a huge financial burden, which might lead to social tension. That is why all countries consider youngsters' successful adaptation as well as the decrease of school dropout a national issue.

On the other hand, there are significant differences between dropouts and graduates according to their socio-economic status: students with disadvantageous socio-economical background have two and a half more probabilities to drop out compared with their middle class peers. Moreover, ethnicity has a correlation with dropout: in the US twice more Afro-American students drop out from school than their white classmates, furthermore, this ratio is higher among Hispanic students. Students with cognitive or emotional challenges have little chance to finish secondary school.

Despite cultural differences, the attitudes, factors, and results of international studies could be applied to Hungarian situation as the challenges of globalized world is reasonably similar in different countries: several basic sociological, psychological or physiological dimensions of secondary school dropout are universal, such as, poverty, discrimination, prejudice, lack of knowledge, and gender socialization.

This paper describes the profile of students at risk. Besides students' cognitive and emotional attributes, family, friends, and schools are responsible for dropout. The research was carried out in 2017 in a Vocational Centre with a self-administered questionnaire. Teachers were asked about the factors contributing to early school leaving, as well as some preventive aspects.

## **2. Definition of School Dropout**

The next paragraph summarizes the concept and aspects of Early School Leaving, Not in Employment, Education or Training and School Dropout.

### *2.1. Early School Leaving (ESL)*

Before the detailed examination of the phenomenon of school dropout, the definition itself should be identified clearly. There are some definitions of the situation when a young person (adolescent or young adult) does not study. The best-known and a wide concept is Early School

Leaving (ESL). According to European Union's definition, early school leavers are 18-24-year old people, who have maximum ISCED 3c short level of education, and currently did not take part in any education or training during 4 weeks before the survey (<http://oktataskepzes.tka.hu/en/early-school-leaving-and-dropout>).

In 2008, the ratio of early school leavers in European Union was 15 per cent, which means that around 6 million young people dropped out of school. However, this figure washes away the differences between member states: while in some countries (Finland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovenia), the rate of ESL students was about 10 per cent, in some southern member states this ratio increased over 30% (Spain – 34%, Malta – 31-40%, Portugal – 37%). (Andrei – Teodorescu – Oancea, 2011). Regarding Hungary, the percentage of early school leavers is higher than 10 per cent; however, a slight increase can be detected: in 2012 it was 11.2% and in 2015 it was 11.6% - which is higher than the European average in the same year (11,0%) ([https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-hu\\_hu.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-hu_hu.pdf)).

Different regions in Hungary are differently concerned in early school leaving. The most endangered region is North Hungary, where the ratio of ESL has increased up to 15 per cent in the last 10 years. This region is followed by the North Plain and South Transdanubia regions, where the rate of early school leavers is in between 10-15%. The best data are from South Plain and West Transdanubia regions, where the ratio of school dropouts was lower than 10 per cent; which is better than the EU average. (Fehérvári, 2015)

The real problem is, that early school leavers are not likely to take part in further education or training in their lives, which leads to several other social problems and risks. Early school leavers are more likely to become unemployed, require different social supports and services, become dependent on government social programs, commit crimes, and live in poverty and are excluded from society (Christle, Jolivet, Nelson, 2007). In addition to this, the number of jobs requiring only low qualification is continuously decreasing both in the EU and in Hungary; and due to rapid technical and technological development, labour market needs more and more highly qualified employees (Kőműves, 2010).

## *2.2. Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)*

Besides ESL, there is another category: NEET – which is less exact, though. The English acronym refers to young people who neither work, nor take part in education or trainings. In 2015, the ratio of NEET young people in Hungary was a bit lower than the EU average: while the average of EU member states was 12.0%, in Hungary it was 11.6%. However, it must be

stated that this figure in 2013 was significantly higher in Hungary: 15.5%, which means that during 2 years a 4 percentage point decrease could be detected. Such a significant decline cannot be considered in any other European countries for such a short period of time. (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&pcode=tesem150&language=en>) The cause of this radical decrease might be the introduction and spread of public work program.

Unlike early school leavers, NEET youngsters form a heterogeneous group, as this category incorporates highly qualified career entrants, who were looking for a job in the period of data collection, as well as young women who are on maternity leave with their babies. Regarding NEET youngsters, EU countries could be divided into four groups on the basis of following factors: their ratio, gender, qualification level, previous work experience, etc. Hungary was ranged in a group together with Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Italy, and Slovakia, where the ratio of NEET youngsters is high, mostly they are young women, usually well-qualified, and have no previous work experience.

On the other hand, Hungarian tendencies are unlike European tendencies in several aspects. The average of the 28 EU member states show only slight difference between men and women in 18-24 age group; moreover, the rate among women is lower. Regarding Hungarian figures, young women are much more likely not to work or study, than young men. (Fehérvári, 2015) High inactivity among women is probably in connection with having a baby and, of course, with the Hungarian child care benefit and maternity leave system.

Another difference between Hungary and EU is the ratio of NEET people. While the EU average (taking into consideration all 28 member states) has been decreasing in both 15-17 and 17-19 age groups, in Hungary their rate has been increasing since 2012, especially the number of those who has only ISCED 2 qualification, which means that they finished maximum the 8-form primary school. This phenomenon could be in connection with the legislation of 2011: the Act on Public Education of 2011 decreased the maximum age of compulsory education from 18 to 16 years. (Fehérvári, 2015) Taking into consideration the ratio of NEET youngsters who do not have secondary qualification, this figure is higher in Hungary than the EU average: while in 2015 in the EU it was 6.6%, in Hungary 8.3% among 20-24-year old people (<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>).

The rates of early school leavers as well as that of NEET youngsters are considered to be output indicators in education. Besides this, there is a so called process indicator about which there have been data since 2014. The process indicator provides data within the public education

system about students' achievements. This concept is student dropout. Teachers, experts and even literature use the concept of school dropout parallel or instead of early school leaving.

### *2.3. School Dropout*

Regarding school dropout, representatives of education identify the phenomenon in different ways, depending on the point of view. When defining the concept, some questions should be asked and answered first:

- Could the students who do not finish the qualification they have started but start another one in the same school and do not leave the school be accounted as dropouts?
- Could the students who continue and finish the qualification in another vocational secondary school be accounted as dropouts?
- Could the students who leave both their original qualification and their school but do not leave the Vocational Centre and start a new qualification in another school of the same Centre be accounted as dropouts?
- Could the students who leave the original Vocational Centre but not the education system, and continue their original qualification or start a new one in another Vocational Centre be accounted as dropouts?

Regarding members' viewpoint, the answer can be yes to any questions. From the point of view of national economy, only the students can be considered to be dropouts who do not finish their qualification either in their original institute or in another one, and they do not start another qualification – so they leave education system without any qualification. Taking into consideration Vocational Centres' viewpoint, students are dropped out if they continue their studies in another Centre. As for the vocational institution (the school), students are accounted to be dropouts if they continue their studies in another school or if they start another qualification in the same vocational school. Due to non-flexibility and non-traversability of vocational education, especially the 3-year long one, if students change their vocational program, they have to start the whole training from the very beginning.

School dropout is defined by education experts as follows: 'A student is considered to be a dropout if they were registered as a student on the same day of the previous year but were not registered on 1 October of the current year (their student relationship has broken off) and they have not received secondary qualification.' (Fehérvári, 2015: 42.) The critical point of defining the dropout indicator is identifying the reference date. According to surveys, describing the process of dropout two reference dates must be identified: 1 October and 1 February.

Dropout can be taken as a single event when the document acknowledging that the student left either the qualification or the school is signed, but can be seen as a process, too. Dropout is often

thought to be a long and complex procession during which several influencing factors can be identified in students' life until the point when they leave their qualification. This paper consider dropout as a process and examines what factors contribute to dropout.

As the two phrases (early school leaving and school dropout) are used parallel both in everyday conversations and in scientific literature referring to early school leaving among day time students in public education, this paper is going to use them as synonyms.

### **3. The Causes of Early School Leaving**

Both national and international scientific literature lists several causes as indicators of early school leaving, but four groups of them can be usually identified: individual, family, school, and community/society.

- Bad family background: disadvantageous family, low-qualified parents.
- Dysfunctional family background, little family support.
- Difference, conflict between school and family values.
- Students belong to group at risk: live on child-welfare support, physically or mentally disabled, students with special needs.
- Students are regularly absent from school.
- Students do not like going to school, they are excluded from school community.
- Students belong to an ethnic minority group (Romani).
- Their place of living often changes, they often change school. (Archambault, 2009; Kőműves, 2010)

Neild, Stoner-Eby and Fursteinberg (2001) listed similar factors that can increase the probability of school dropout:

- If the student is a boy, older than his peers, and belongs to an ethnic minority group.
- If the student is brought up in a lone parent family or in a family with low income, or their parents has low qualification.
- If the student is not successful in their studies: they fail, have worse grades than their peers, or they are frequently absent from school.
- If the student has behavioural problems.

Family is one of the most significant indicators contributing to early school leaving. Based on an American study (Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2007), the socio-economic status of the family has a fundamental influence on school dropout: children from low-income families are 2.4 more

likely to leave education than their middle class peers. Their research also proved that students whose families receives social maintenance are more likely to drop out of school when starting secondary education. Moreover, students are at risk whose parents have low qualification (only elementary). Archambault and her colleagues (2009) stated that the educational methods of the parents whose children leave school early are usually not effective, and these parents have low requirements regarding school results.

### *3.1. School as a Factor of Dropout*

Besides family, the other significant factor is school. Failures that are experienced in the early period of school career may become the starting point of a negative spiral, the consequence of which is student's weakening contacts to school, and this leads to school dropout (Christle, Jolivet, Nelson, 2007). Christenson and Thurlow (2004) also think that school dropout is a long process and can be predicted by particular indicators, such as disengagement (being absent many times), unsuccessful school experience (learning or behavioural problems). They usually start in primary school and get stronger through years when the feeling of being excluded and negative feeling towards school are added.

Early school leaving generally happens in secondary education. Adolescence is a period of time that can be described by huge behavioural, cognitive and emotional changes. At this age, a significant decrease in engagement towards school and learning can be seen, as peers become students' references: they follow them in communication, behaviour, and decisions.

However, early school leaving does not endanger all students. Based on Christle, Jolivet and Nelson's research (2007), some factors have a fundamental influence on school dropout. One of them is the student's school achievements, while the other is attendance at school – both showed negative correlation with dropout. Neild, Stoner-Eby and Fursteinberg (2001) found that the way student start their secondary education has a significant impact on their school career. First-form students experience stress when they receive their first grades in secondary school. Although it is possible to overcome the shock of bad marks, not everybody succeeds: half of the students who received ones at the beginning of their secondary school, failed at the end of the academic year.

Early non-success has several background causes, such as parents could not provide enough support for their children; teachers did not have suitable competencies to be able to help their students; students had weak mathematical and reading competencies; and impersonal school atmosphere where students got lost. Researchers stated if the student has school failures or they

fail at the end of ninth school year or they are usually absent from school, these factors have a significant impact on the probability of being dropped out.

Another important indicator of school failures and dropout is maladaptive or undesirable student behaviours. The rates of student law violations reported by schools were positively related to dropout. Experts stated that schools that often rely on exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, may impede the educational progress of students, perpetuating a failure cycle. Students who are excluded from school have fewer opportunities to gain knowledge and skills suitable for the labour market. (Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2007)

Lessard, Poirier and Fortin (2010) highlighted another important school factor: the quality of teacher-student relationship. Students who experience a bad relationship with their teacher are more likely to drop out than students who report a warm relationship – especially boys. Dropouts reported that conflicts with teachers were one of the causes motivating their decision to leave school before obtaining their qualification. Moreover, teachers also perceived that relationship with their students influences students' school achievements.

Another research (Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2007) notices that school culture has an important impact on early school leaving: teachers have an important social capital for their students. If students' social capital is mostly based on their teachers, it can decrease the possibility of dropout by 50%. They also stated that the physical environment of the school has an influence on early school leaving: in schools that were clean and neat and better equipped lower ratio of dropout could be identified.

Both national and foreign researches support the fact that dropout is a longer process and although it is typically appears in secondary school, most risk factors can be identified even in primary education (Bánkúti et. al., 2004). In Hungary, secondary education is divided into three levels, which show significant correlation with students' socio-economic background. Examining the different school types it can be stated that there are powerful differences between them. Although dropout can be seen in primary education as well, the highest ratio of early school leaving can be found in vocational education, especially in the one that does not provide general final examination (the so-called Hungarian *érettségi vizsga*). Taking into consideration the dropout ratio in the 3-year vocational education, it is 46.9 percentage. (Fehérvári, 2015)

In 2013-2015, in Hungary and in two other countries, Slovenia and Serbia, a huge project, named CroCoos was run focusing on early school leaving,. Participant of the project identified six fundamental factor leading to school dropout: absenteeism, grade repetition, deteriorating achievement, boredom, behavioural problems, bullying, violence and school harassment.



(<http://oktataskepzes.tka.hu/en/crocoos-research-reports-171124120759>) Absenteeism was found to be the most important early distress signal. It is important because it is easy to be followed up and measured by and well-targeted interventions can be built on it as well. Experts claim that the higher the rate of absenteeism the higher the chance for a dropout.

The practice of grade repetition significantly leads to dropout but seems to be problematic and contradictory. It is actually thought to be a punishment for student's under achievement; however, it is a costly way of it. These students stay longer in education with a higher possibility of not accomplishing school and not obtaining a certificate. Sometimes big differences between primary and secondary school expectations can be detected. Skills that were not learnt during the primary school can hardly be acquired on secondary level, and have a negative effect on students' achievements. The lack of key competencies leads to school failures which turn the person to be unmotivated and eventually to drop out of school.

Students at risk often display certain behaviour, such as aggression towards teachers or peers, a too intense or a too shy temper, which is in close connection with dropping out. However, these behavioural patterns are considered to be a distress signal that hides deeper conflicts inside the person or their circumstances. On the other hand, frustration that can derive from a long time school failure, lack of success or negative feedbacks from teachers may lead to behaviour problems. Although bullying on a certain level is thought to be the part of normal school life, it may end in isolation and exclusion of some students. The feeling of loneliness and humiliation can quickly lead to alienation from school and then dropping out. Harassment and school violence is the active mental or even physical abuse. The timely intervention of a professional adult is essential to solve the problem and stop the process before its escalation.

Surprisingly, there are students who, in spite of the fact that they are considered to be non-at-risk student, sometimes drop out of a school. They typically neither have bad achievements nor behaviour problems; they are uninterested in school and under- or unmotivated: they are bored. However, boredom and low motivation as distress signals are missing from most of the policy and practice of schools. The following symptoms may refer to boredom: unwillingness to go to school or participate on classes, not able to concentrate, or loss of enthusiasm in school. According to experiences there are a lot of methods that strengthen the motivation of students towards school: extra-curricular programs that involve students and provides a social event; practical approach to learning instead of theoretical knowledge sharing; interactive methods that require other than academic competencies, etc.

## 4. Research and Results

The research was carried out from February to May 2017 among the teachers of a Vocational Centre that has seven secondary vocational schools. The survey had two parts: a qualitative and a quantitative one: first directors of vocational schools and the representatives of the Centre were asked in a semi-structured focus group interview. Their answers were analysed and made the basis of the questionnaire that was spread among the teachers of the Vocational Centre. This paper focuses on the quantitative questionnaire survey.

Printed questionnaires were distributed in schools on a date discussed earlier with the principal. Out of the 314 questionnaires that were taken to the seven schools of the Vocational Centre 158 ones were answered. Based on the number of teachers in schools, it can be stated that the ratio of respondents was between one third and 50 per cent in all vocational schools. The sample made around 50% of the population and was selected from all schools relatively evenly. That is why the research can be considered to be representative regarding the given Vocational Centre.

Questionnaire data were manually recorded in Excel, then it was converted into SPSS database. The statistical analysis of the data was done by the program SPSS 22.0.

### 4.1. Result of the Research

According to gender division, 38% (60 people) of the respondents are men, while 62% (92 people) are women. Regarding to age differences, the youngest subject was 27 years old, while the oldest 63. The average age of respondents is 46.44 year. Even the average age refers to a serious problem of teachers: ageing. Based on age, a new variable was formulated (age groups) and it was examined how many teachers belong to each age group. The rate of teachers younger than 30 years was only 2.5%; on the contrary, teachers over 60 made nearly 6% of the sample. The biggest age group was people in between 41-50 years old, 55 teachers could be rated in this group giving 35% of the sample. The second biggest group was teachers of 51-60 years old: 42 people, 27% of the sample, while the third biggest group incorporated bit younger 40 people, aged from 31 to 40, giving 25% of the sample. The figures refer to the aging population pyramid of teachers.

Besides age, teachers were asked how many years work experience they have. The shortest time of work experience was less than 1 year, while the longest 40 years. The average period of work experience was 17.35 years. The data were recorded into a new variable in order to know the ratio of career starters, the ones who have experience, and the ones who have decades of

experience. According to the table 1, very few teachers can be accounted to the career starter group and have maximum 3 years of experience. The biggest group is, nearly 40% of the sample, teachers who have 11-20 year of work experience.

Table 1. Work experience of teachers

Work experience (year)	number	%
<= 3	11	7%
4 - 10	32	20%
11 - 20	61	39%
21 - 30	30	19%
31+	19	12%

It was asked and analysed what qualification teachers have. According to the results, most teachers have the required qualification, which is mostly master degree in secondary schools. Three quarters of teachers have a master degree, while 16% has a bachelor one. Only 7.6% of the teachers does not have a degree, only a secondary school certificate.

It was examined by crosstable whether there is a difference between qualifications of teachers teaching general education subjects and that of the ones teaching professional subjects. Chi-square test is proved to be significant ( $\chi^2=51,945$ ;  $p<0,000$ ): 100 per cent of teachers (21 people) who do not have a degree teaches only professional subjects. Moreover, 88% of teachers having a bachelor degree teaches professional subject, but only one fourth of teachers who owns master degree work as professional teachers, while two third of this group teaches general education subjects.

Analysing the data from another point view, the survey showed that less than half (47.7%) of teachers teaching professional subjects have master degree, while the same ratio among teachers teaching general education subject is 96.5%. One third (33.8%) of professional subject teachers has bachelor degree, but it is only 3.5% among general education subject teachers. Finally, nearly one fifth (18.5%) of professional subject teachers does not have a degree, while none of general subject teachers can be rated in this category.

The purpose of the questionnaire survey was to find factors leading to dropout according to teachers. First, teachers were asked to define the phenomenon of dropout.

Table 2. Qualification vs. Subjects taught

	General education subjects	Professional subjects	Both
Secondary school certificate		10 people; 100,0%	
Tertiary education certificate		2 people; 100,0%	
BA/BSc	3 people; 12,0%	22 people; 88,0%	
MA/MSc	82 people; 67,7%	31 people; 25,6%	8 people; 6,6%

Various definitions of school dropout were identified in the focus group interview and then included in the questionnaire. Teachers were asked to rank the statements on the basis of the level, which statement describes best school dropout. Five statements were listed in the questionnaire:

- 1) Leave the class, fail.
- 2) Leave original profession.
- 3) Leave school.
- 4) Leave Vocational Centre.
- 5) Leave education system.

Teachers were asked to give the lowest ranking point (1) to the statement they agree least, and the highest ranking point (5) to the statement they agree the most. Figures in the table refer to the number of teachers in each ranking place.

Table 3. Definition of dropout – ranking

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Leave the class, fail.	46	17	18	21	<b>50</b>
Leave original profession.	25	43	<b>45</b>	35	4
Leave school.	9	36	<b>53</b>	39	15
Leave Vocational Centre.	29	43	30	<b>48</b>	2
Leave education system.	46	12	5	8	<b>81</b>

According to the table 3, most teachers (81 people, more than 50%) think that the best definition of school dropout is when the student leaves education system. But it must not be forgotten that another significant group (50 people, 1/3 of respondents) believes that dropout means if the student leaves the class, fails and has to repeat the school year. On the other hand, nearly the same amount of teachers (46 people) states that this definition does not describe the

phenomenon of dropout at all. On the basis of table 3, it can be stated that opinions of teachers are different. Due to the fact that Vocational Centres were founded in 2015, Vocational Centres function as employers for all the teachers and the students. So it is not surprising that a significant amount of teachers (48 people) think that the definition 'The student leaves the Vocational Centre' remarkably correctly describes the concept of dropout.

The research wanted find an answer on the question what causes can be found behind early school leaving – from the teachers' point of view. According to the primary socialization theory by Oetting and Lynch (2006), adolescent's primary social contacts are: family, school and peers. These three factors link to the adolescents and, on the other hand, with each other forming a strong circle that supports the adolescent. If any element of the ring or their relationship weakens, it has an influence on the adolescent, too. Examining the causes of early school leaving, these three factors were taken into consideration with some modification. The school was divided into two parts: teachers and the institution. Moreover, a new category was included: personal features of the student. Finally, the following five categories were formulated: 1) Student's personal features, 2) Family background, 3) Peers, 4) Teachers, 5) Institution (school). In each category, 5-7 states were listed. Respondents were asked to evaluate all statements on a 5-grade scale, expressing their agreement: to what level the factor contributes to dropout.

Regarding students' personal features, seven statements were listed. Fig. 1 shows that students' deviant behaviour influences most (3.99) school dropout. The second most important factor is if the students do not think that secondary qualification is important to gain (3.71) and they are satisfied with ISCED 2 level. Out of the seven statements, the factor referring to students' primary school results is on the fourth place, which means that in teachers' opinion this factor has less impact on early school leaving than deviant behaviour or career planning.

In adolescence, peers have an essential effect on the individual. Teachers agree that peers and friends influence students' behaviour, achievements, and attitude to school. Teachers highlighted classmates' deviant behaviour as the most significant impact on students (3.45). The other important factor is friends' negative attitude to school (3.33).

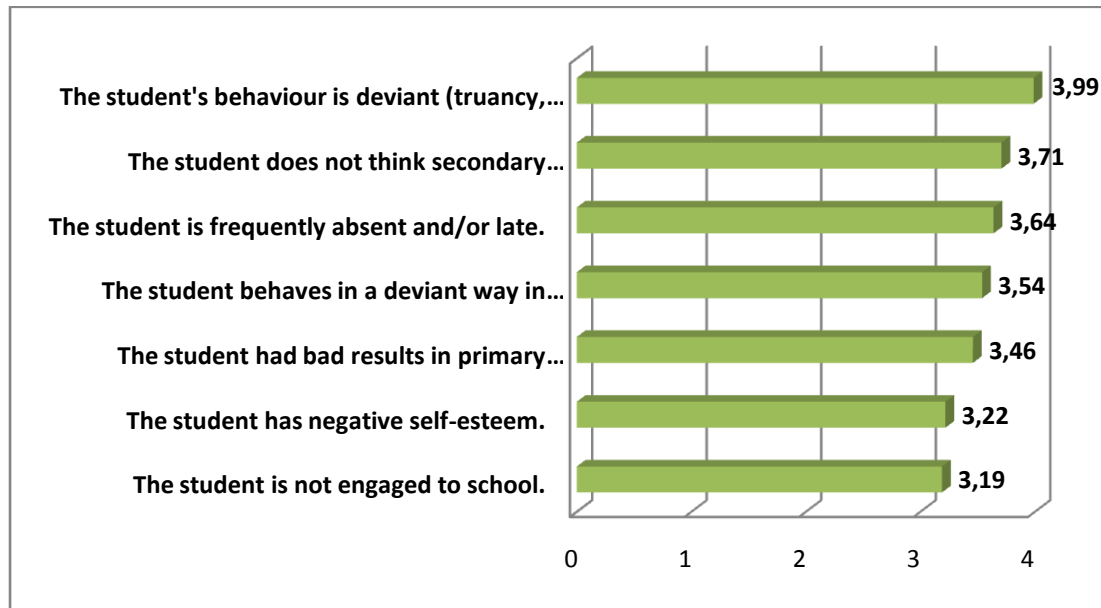


Fig. 1. Student's personal features

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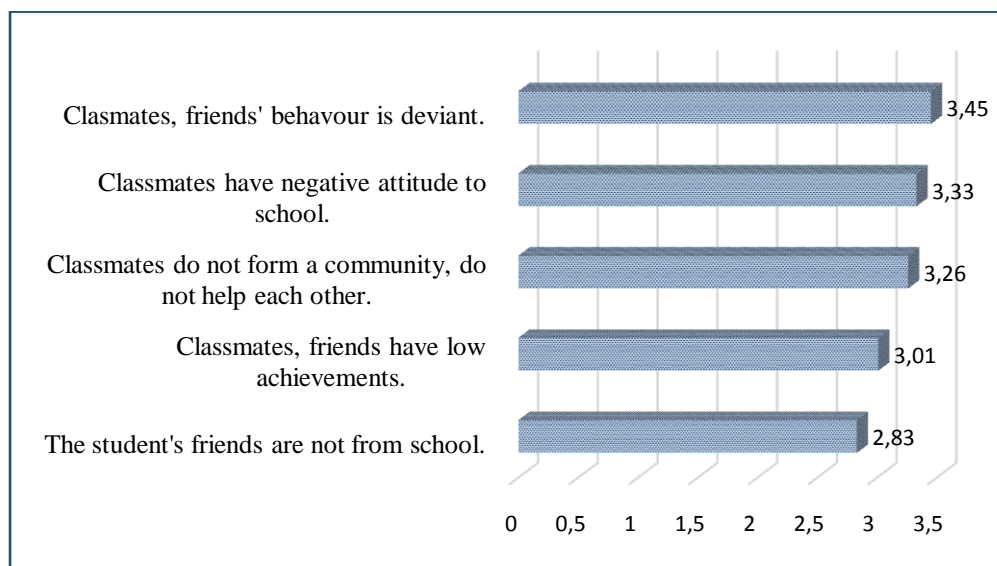


Fig. 2. Peers' influence

Comparing personal features and peers' effect, it can be stated that the most significant factors influencing dropout were deviant behaviour. Teachers think that the student's deviant behaviour as well that of their peers' have the most negative impact on early school leaving. On the other hand, the second most important factor in Peers category is classmates' negative attitude to

school (3.33), while in Personal features category, low student engagement is the least important aspect (3.19).

Regarding family background factors, teachers suppose that a non-supportive family attitude (4.08) has a crucial impact on dropout. Another significant aspect is if the family lives in bad circumstances (3.46) – if there is no proper heating, lighting, bathing, washing, and learning facilities. However, teachers think that having many brothers and sisters (2.05) or being brought up in a lone-parent family (2.54) do not or just slightly influence dropout. The latter factor might have a small impact on early school leaving because divorce rate is quite high in Hungary, the result of which is that a lot of students live in a lone-parent or a reconstituted (mosaic) family.

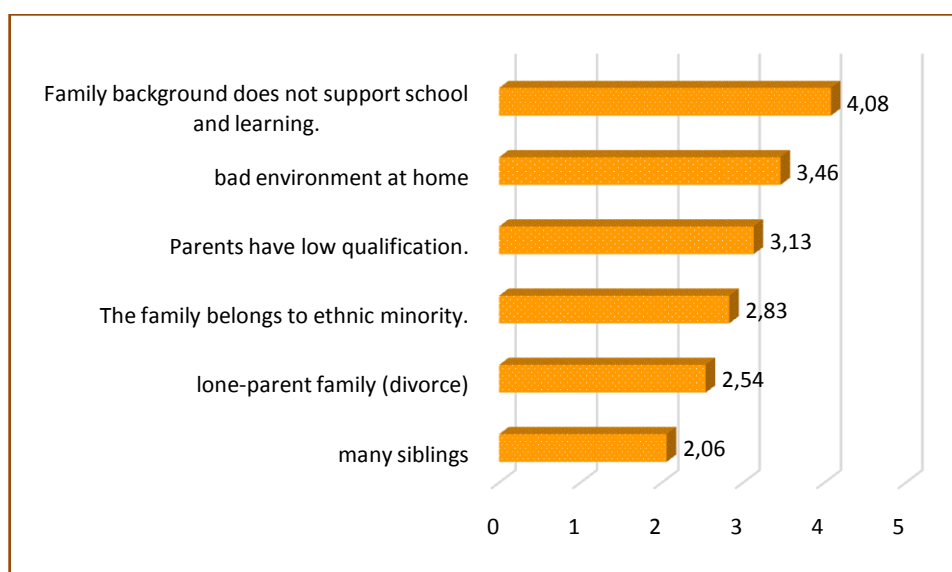


Fig. 3. Family's influence

Regarding the influence of school on dropout, it was examined from two different points of view: from the teachers' and from that of the institute. Factors in the 'Teacher' category referred to their teaching and education methods, as well as their mental state. The 'Institution' category listed some other important elements referring to the institutional culture and the management type. Comparing the means of factors in 'Teacher' category with those of the previous three ones, it is obvious, that the Teacher's factors received the lowest points (the highest mean was 3.23).

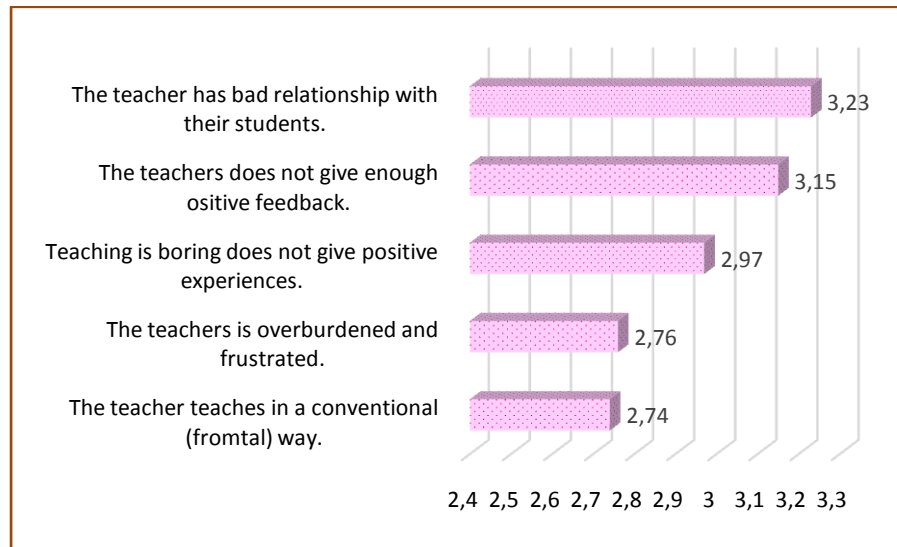


Fig. 4. Teachers' influence

Examining Diagram 4, the most significant factor is teacher's bad relationship with their students (3.23), followed by the factor not giving enough positive feedback to students (3.15). On the other hand, teaching methodology has a slight impact on early school leaving in teachers' opinion: the factors of teaching is boring (2.97) and methods are frontal, conventional (2.74) received low points. Moreover, teachers believe that conventional teaching methods have the slightest effect on dropout, they listed this factor on the last place.

The order of these factors should be thought over. In secondary schools, mostly generation Z studies; they love working in teams and prefer creative tasks where the focus is on activity instead of passive observation. Moreover, as they are brought up in digital world, they are able to pay attention to an issue only for 10 seconds, teachers' evaluation can be questioned: does teaching methodology influence school dropout only to little extent? On the contrary, principals in the focus group interview highlighted the significance of methodology as it has an effect on students' achievements, attitude, and therefore on early school leaving. The same conclusion was made in CroCooS project, which stated the boredom is one of the most significant causes of dropout. ([http://oktataskepzes.tka.hu/content/documents/CroCooS/RP6\\_hu\\_Unalom.pdf](http://oktataskepzes.tka.hu/content/documents/CroCooS/RP6_hu_Unalom.pdf))

Besides teachers, the school has an influence on early school leaving: if the student feels not OK at school, if the institutional culture is built on authoritarian management, if it does not support developing students' personality, it may contribute to dropout. Among the five categories, teachers found category 'Institute' the least significant: the highest mean does not reach 3.00, which means that teachers rather not agree that the school has an effect on school dropout.



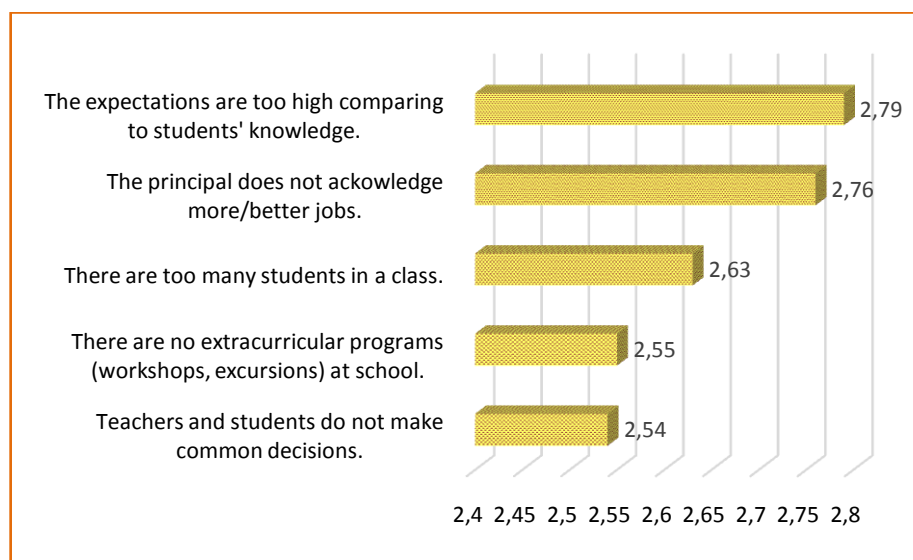


Fig. 5. Influence of the institute

Examining Diagram 5, it can be seen, that the most important factor on dropout is too high expectations (2.79), closely followed by the factor not acknowledging better achievements (2.76). The least significant factors are the lack or shortage of extracurricular activities (2.55), as well as if there is no common decision making (2.54).

There were altogether 28 factors listed in the questionnaire. In the previous pages these factors were examined by the five categories. Now all these factors can be seen, in decreasing order, regardless which category they belong to. To easily identify categories, five different colours were used: category of personal features is green, family is orange, peers is blue, teachers is rosy, and school is yellow – the same colours were used in the previous diagrams, too.

Table 4: Factors Influencing Dropout

Factors influencing dropout	Mean	Category
Family background does not support school and learning.	4,08	F
The student's behaviour is deviant (truancy, drinking, drugtaking, aggression).	3,99	S
The student does not think secondary qualification important.	3,71	S
The student is frequently absent and/or late.	3,64	S
The student behaves in a deviant way in lessons (deliberately annoys lessons).	3,54	S
The student had bad results in primary school.	3,46	S
bad environment at home	3,46	F
Classmates, friends' behaviour is deviant.	3,45	P
Classmates have negative attitude to school.	3,33	P
Classmates do not form a community, do not help each other.	3,26	P
The teacher has bad relationship with their students.	3,23	T
The student has negative self-esteem.	3,22	S
The student is not engaged to school.	3,19	S

The teachers does not give enough positive feedback.	3,15	T
Parents have low qualification.	3,13	F
Classmates, friends have low achievements.	3,01	P
Teaching is boring does not give positive experiences.	2,97	T
The family belongs to ethnic minority.	2,83	F
The student's friends are not from school.	2,83	P
The expectations are too high comparing to students' knowledge.	2,79	Sc
The teachers is overburdened and frustrated.	2,76	T
The principal does not acknowledge more/better jobs.	2,76	Sc
The teacher teaches in a conventional (frontal) way.	2,74	T
There are too many students in a class.	2,63	Sc
There are no extracurricular programs (workshops, excursions) at school.	2,55	Sc
lone-parent family (divorce)	2,54	F
Teachers and students do not make common decisions.	2,54	Sc
many siblings	2,06	F

Studying the table including all the 28 factors, it can be seen that students' personal features and a family factor can be found on the first five places, while on the next five places peers' influence is significant. However, the first factor that refers to teachers' effect can be found only on the 11th place; moreover, the first factor referring to the influence of the institute appears on the 20th place. This order indicates that teachers think both they and the school have a slight impact on early school leaving: only two factors referring to teachers' significance can be found in the first part of the table (bad relationship with students, not enough positive feedback); regarding the school, all the factors are in the second part of the table. However, all the seven factors of student's personal features are listed in the first part of the table. Teachers assign the same importance to peers as well: all the five factors can be found in the first part of the table.

The conclusion of the survey is that teachers attribute much less significance to their role and that of the institute in early school leaving than to students and their peers. Although it is obvious that peers have essential influence in adolescence, it is surprising that teachers underestimate their own role in students' life, well-being, and in dropout. Based on the research, it cannot be identified properly whether teachers evaluate the situation in a wrong way, or do not want to take responsibility.

Table 3 presents how teachers defy dropout. It was examined whether correlation can be found between variables regarding the definitions and the causes of dropout. The variable 'Student leaves the school system' has positive significant correlation with two causative variables: the teachers does not give enough positive feedback ( $r = 0,244$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ), there are no extracurricular

activities ( $r= 0,173$ ;  $p<0,05$ ). It must be stated that both factors belong to the category 'Institute', therefore belong to teachers and school's competence, which means they have the opportunity to change the situation. The first factor (not enough positive feedback) is in close connection with evaluation and measurement. Teachers must be aware of the fact that giving marks is not equal with evaluating students' achievements. Teachers evaluate students in different other ways (orally and even non-verbally) – sometimes even not consciously. But these feedback are often as important to students as marks.

Although the correlation is weak with extracurricular programs, their significance must not be abandoned. During the focus group interview, principal agreed that teachers can build a better, more personal relationship with their students in extracurricular programs. Taking into consideration other surveys, relationship between teachers and students may crucially influence early school leaving. These programs provide opportunities for students to strengthen their relationship both with their teachers and their classmates, and these close contacts decrease the possibility of dropout. However, teachers did not think that the factor 'students do not form a community' has a big effect on dropout: the mean of the variable is 3.26.

The second most frequently selected definition of dropout was: the student leaves the class because he/she fails. This variable has positive significant correlation with two causative variables: bad results in primary school ( $r= 0,161$ ;  $p<0,05$ ) and brought up in a lone-parent family ( $r= 0,176$ ;  $p<0,05$ ); the correlation is very weak, though. The first correlation is obvious: if the students finishes primary school with bad marks, they have a big opportunity to not meet the requirements of secondary school and fail at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> form. Although failure and grade repetition does not mean that the student leaves the school system, several studies stated that bad achievements significantly correlate with early school leaving. According to an American study, dropout does not start by the first failures but underachievement and failures experienced in the first form of secondary school suggest dropout.

Finally, teachers were asked to evaluate factors that contribute to decreasing dropout. The focus of this question was not the family or peers but teachers and school. Researchers believe that teachers have a significant impact on their students, and they are responsible for what is happening during and between lessons. Respondents had to evaluate the five given factors on a 5-grade scale on the basis of the extent they contribute to the decrease of dropout. Results show that teachers cannot see big differences between the significance of the factors; on the other hand, they do not find any of them highly important as the highest mean is 3.85.

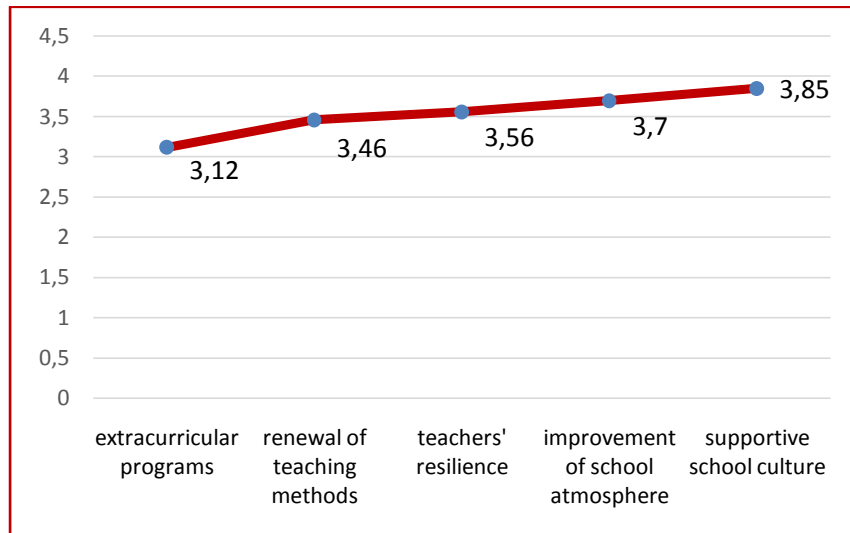


Fig. 6. Factors decreasing dropout

Examining the diagram it can be stated that supportive school culture (3.85) was believed the most significant factor, while extracurricular programs (3.12) were thought to be the least important one. The renewal of methodology also needs attention as it received the second lowest points (3.46), which means that teachers assign little significance to this factor.

There were some very similar causative and preventive factors, and it gave the idea to compare the means. According to Table 5, it is obvious that teachers believe a factor less significant if it is a causative one. Moreover, the difference between the means regarding the same variable is rather big: extracurricular programs – 0.57; pedagogical methods – 0.72; and teachers' resilience – 0.8. In a further survey, it should be researched why the same factors seem more important if they are named as preventive ones rather than causative ones.

Table 5: Comparing the Means of Causative and Preventive Factors

Causative factors	mean	Preventive factors	mean
There are no extracurricular programs (workshops, excursions) at school.	2,55	extracurricular programs	3,12
The teacher teaches in a conventional (frontal) way.	2,74	renewal of teaching methods	3,46
The teachers is overburdened and frustrated.	2,76	teachers' resilience	3,56

## 5. Conclusion

Early school leaving is a serious problem in secondary vocational education affecting all members of it: the student, the family, the school, and the Vocational Centre. Moreover, dropout has a long-lasting effect on individual's life often generating a social problem, such as having lower labour market opportunities, more probability of being unemployed, falling back on social aid, having worse health conditions, etc. According to a European Union strategy, by 2020 Hungary intends to decrease the ratio of vocational school dropouts under 10%. All this means that both the interests of the national economy and the expectations of the European Union give direction for the development of vocational education: take measures for decreasing early school leaving. To be able to reduce the rate of dropout exactly elaborated prevention and intervention actions should be introduced in vocational schools. The actions can be the most effective if it is realized what background factors contribute to dropout and to what extent they influence school leaving.

According to the results of both national and international researches, the following factors are considered basic in dropout: student, family, peers, and school. In these researches, all the factors were examined; and the data were collected from teachers of vocational schools. Teachers believe that student's personal features and family background have the most significant effect on early school leaving. Although neither of these factors can be eliminated from the process of dropout, teachers can fundamentally influence students' attitude to school – either in a negative or in a positive way. Students' attitude to school and learning definitely impacts on their school achievements, the extent of absenteeism, and students' behavior during lessons.

Teachers stated that students' deviant behavior (truancy, drinking, drug taking, aggression) has an essential effect on early school leaving. Although peers' influence is the most significant, in adolescence and the role of friends is extremely important in copying deviant behavioral patterns, the effect of teachers must not be ignored. If students have a good relationship with their teachers, if they trust teachers and could turn to them in case of problems, students are less likely to behave in a deviant way and more likely to have positive attitude towards school – unless they rely on only their peers' opinion and regard them as references.

In the conclusion, teachers and schools have a very important role in reducing school dropout. Teachers' responsibility is to build and maintain a good teacher-student relationship, to prioritise rather educational task to the teaching ones, to apply cooperative techniques instead of frontal work, and to intend to increase their resilience. Besides teachers, schools have a significant role:

schools should emphasise organizing extracurricular programs and involving students into them, and should more appreciate form teachers' work.

However, there are some system problems. Due to the rigidity of Hungarian vocational education, is students have enrolled to a vocational training, they have no chance to change it during their training, unless they start a new one from the very beginning. The consequence of this inflexibility that several students leave vocational education because they realize that the trade they have chosen does not suit for them, they cannot have good achievements. So they leave their original training but it is absolutely not sure whether they enroll another one or leave educational system – especially if they are over 16, the compulsory age of education.

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### **Short professional biography**

Csilla Marianna Szabó: associated professor at the University of Dunaújváros, Director of the Institute of Teachers Training. During the last 6 years, at the University of Dunaújváros she took and takes part in many big national and European Union projects, working some of them as a leader of a subproject. Her most important projects are HASIT FAS 2 and HASIT FSA 3, where is worked as a project manager and EFOP 343, where she works as a professional manager. She graduated from University of Szeged then Pécs as a teacher of Hungarian, Russian and English language and literature, and defended her PhD dissertation in ELTE in Educational Doctorate School. Her research fields are generation Z, dropout from secondary school and higher education, and foreign students' adaptation to Hungarian higher education. She is the member of the Association of Teacher Trainers, represent her institution in the Association of Mellearn and in the Pedagogical Committee of Hungarian Rectors' Conference.